

Foreign Voices



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What role for "traditional-religious" authorities in fragile states? The example of Tajikistan

This is the first issue of *Foreign Voices* - a new electronic publication series by the Development and Peace Foundation, Bonn. *Foreign Voices* aims to transmit positions and debates from abroad into the German and European discourse. There is a consensus that views from countries directly affected by certain problems or especially involved in specific international matters should be taken into account. However, discussions on development, peace and security issues quite often tend to take place mainly within national expert circles or academic arenas. *Foreign Voices* gives a voice to experts from other world regions and delivers insights into other discourses and political cultures to German and European experts and the public.

In this first issue, Abdullo Hakim Rahnamo from Tajikistan shares his thoughts and experience on the role of "traditional-religious" authorities in fragile states with us. He was a speaker at the SEF Symposium 2005 entitled "Between Overload and Self-Interest? The Role of Non-State Actors in Fragile States". The Symposium which was held on 1-2 December 2005 marked for the time being the end of the SEF project series "Development and *Failing States*". It focused on the role of non-state actors in weak and fragile states, on their ambivalent status and practical options for action, and it discussed external actors' strategies in dealing with local groups.

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**"The governments must accept the power of
religious authorities"**



In comparison with surrounding countries, especially Afghanistan and even Iran or Pakistan, it is difficult to call the Tajik society a traditional society. In the neighbouring countries most traditional institutions are still alive, whereas in Tajik society many traditional institutions which played a significant role in social and political processes were destroyed as a result of deep formative changes during Soviet times, or at least their role in society became very weak. It should be mentioned though that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some traditional institutions have become more active again. Here I want to interpret the role and significance of three institutions: "mahalla" (district), "warlords" and "religious authorities". Among them, religious authorities play the most powerful role in the political process.

1. "Mahalla" as the foundation of the traditional society in Tajikistan

The *mahalla* as the basic element of societal construction in Tajikistan is central to the interest of most researchers on Central Asia. *Mahalla* means district or small part of a city or a village, and it gathers a group of people with a special subculture. The big traditional cities of Central Asia, especially in Farghana valley, are divided into hundreds of *mahallas*. Strong unwritten laws exist inside the *mahallas* bringing order into life, for example rules on social construction, on relations between different generations, on different traditional ceremonies relating to death and life of the people, on solutions of family and neighbourhood conflicts and others. The *mahalla* has its own mosque, cemetery and a place for organizing weddings or other events, all governed by the head of the *mahalla* and other "respectful people". The latter also have the role of the supreme organ of the legislative, executive and judicial institutions of the *mahalla*.

One of the fundamental functions of the *mahalla* is its ability to mobilize people for different purposes: for doing some work such as building a mosque or digging canals, for political protection, or even for war. This function of the *mahalla* makes it a powerful and important institution in political and social processes. Its leaders who influence opinions and control the behaviour of their people can define the *mahalla's* position towards the central governments' policies or programs and thus influence them.

The role of this old traditional institution became stronger after Tajikistan gained independence. The Tajik government accepted this fact, and tried to integrate the *mahallas* into the state chain of governance. Today – in accordance with the law on the self-government of the *mahallas* – the government establishes the position of the *mahalla's* head thereby giving this traditional institution an official status. In this way the state authorities take their policy to the heart of the *mahallas* and control the mobilizing ability of the *mahallas* for their own benefit.

2. The decade of warlords

The second unofficial institution which was influential in Tajik society during the last decade were the “warlords”. At the beginning of the civil war in 1992 and due to the weakness of the central government, the influence of the military commanders on political processes became very strong. The commanders were the local heroes of the *mahallas* who fought for or against government, and who after the civil war took high political positions. They did not just have political and military power but they kept most economic sources in their hands as well.

In the mid-1990's, the warlords reached the top level of their influence and prestige. Each part of the country was under the influence of this or that warlord and each big factory or farm became their property. This gave them the opportunity to dictate their view on political processes, while the state lacked power to do anything against them. Between 1994 and 2000, most warlords tried hard to give official status to their power, and for this purpose they aimed at becoming member of parliament or assuming an official position in the government.

After the signing of the peace declaration in 1997, the opposition's influential warlords also found access to important governmental positions and economic resources. For instance, the chairman positions of the petroleum committee, the gas committee, the precious stones committee, the customs committee, the positions of the minister for emergency situations and of the deputy minister for defence were given to the opposition's warlords. Thus, the warlords became officially institutionalized. The decade between 1992 and 2002 can therefore truly be called the decade of the warlords' influence on the political process of Tajikistan.

The warlords' turn did not last too long. With the strengthening of the central government, the state began its struggle against them. The warlords became serious opponents to President Rahmonov. Their continuous influence created obstacles for normal governmental activities. For the past five years, the central government therefore realized a “war on warlords” as a result of which most famous warlords were killed, put in jail or fled the country.

3. The role of religious authorities in contemporary Tajikistan

Throughout Soviet times the role of the Islamic clergy was limited. But after the collapse of the USSR, religious authorities returned to the political scene with new energy, strength and respect. Despite the fact that the Constitution declares the Republic of Tajikistan a secular state where “religious organizations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere with state affairs”, Islamic authorities in modern Tajikistan are occupying a permanent niche in the public-political life and are seriously affecting political process.

Types of political participation of Islamic authorities in Tajikistan

There are at least three types of political participation of Islamic authorities in modern politics of Tajikistan:

1. *Dependent political participation* (“official clergy”): The “official clergy” is a body of loyal religious leaders which is established by the government's confirmation. Its representatives occupy the official religious positions. The official clergy does not have any independent participation in the political process and is usually used by the secular state to realize its political goals. The other function of this body is that the state is trying to keep its influence in the religious sphere by forming a group of loyal clergy.

2. *Passive political participation* (“traditional clergy”): This specific category of Islamic authorities brings together a huge number of important religious actors who sustain conservative religious positions, preserve mystic lives, follow traditional and cultic ceremonies, and enjoy high respect and reputation among religious people. They ask people to turn their attention to higher values, to the purification of their souls, and to humanism and morality, without promoting political engagement or support for the course of the government or any other political actor.

3. *Direct and active political participation* (“political-reformist clergy”): The most conspicuous form of political participation of Muslim authorities is the direct participation of “political-reformist clergy” in the political process. This category of Islamic authorities includes those clergymen who practice pro-reform views in religious thinking and who have an active role in the political process. The main characteristics of the “political-reformist” clergy are consolidation of Islam and politics, using Islam as a political ideology and a channel of political participation, having well-organized alliances, like the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). They are perceived as the main opponent of the secular government.

4. The creation of a legal base for integrating Muslim authorities in the political process

The real influence of Muslim authorities in political processes is to be seen in the interrelation between the Tajik secular state and the Tajik Islamic political authorities. The comparison of the real potential of “Islamic” and “secular” factors shows that both of them have strong positions in contemporary Tajikistan and none of them can be excluded from the political and social processes. Understanding and recognizing this reality was the logical and rational base for the Tajik peace building process and the Islamic-secular coexistence. In the last six years both Tajik sides, the Tajik secular state and Tajik Muslim authorities, constantly worked to integrate the Muslim authorities in the legal political process.

The official statements and documents of 1992-1997 show the originally radical approach of Tajik secularists. From 1997-2000 this radicalism was transformed by accepting the post-conflict realities. The key moment in this process was an article by President Rahmonov where he declared that “the secular state is compatible with religious political parties”. The President’s position was a clear signal for the secularists and a “green light” for moderate Islamists. In September 1999, constitutional reforms led to important amendments for the integration of Muslim authorities in political processes:

First, in the new version of the Tajik Constitution, the most disputed provision that “religion is separated from state” was changed into “religious organizations are separated from state” (Art. 8). This means only structural and institutional, but not total separation between the state and religion, and at the same time, creates opportunities for cooperation between them. The second significant change was the constitutional legalization of religious political parties. According to Article 28 of the new Constitution, Tajik citizens now can establish religious political parties.

In a next step, the government permitted the re-registration of the Islamic Revival Party in November 1999. In February 2000, IRPT participated in the first post-conflict parliamentary elections. Furthermore, as a part of the peace agreement, 30% of positions in central government and municipalities were given to Islamic representatives.

At the same time, an important evolution was taking place among Muslim political authorities. In 1999, one of the main ideologists of the Tajik political Islam, vice-leader of IRPT Himmatzoda, declared the secular state compatible with Islam “since the

theocratic model of state where the ruler is the representative of God is only a historic model of Christianity and Shi'a Islam". He wrote that "in Islam the Muslims are not obligated to establish the theocratic type of state". Himmatzoda's interpretation had significant influence on Tajik Islamists and reduced their protest against a secular state.

The Islamic opposition finally officially declared its acceptance of the new version of the Tajik Constitution. In a next step, Tajik Muslim authorities recognized the nation-state as natural unit of the contemporary international community and dissociated themselves from the controversial idea of a transnational state or "khilofat". As another important step, political Islam in Tajikistan was transformed from a political military movement into a contemporary political party. IRPT distanced itself from all kind of military actions and terror methods. All Islamic party's militia groups were dissolved.

This is what we call "the Tajik experience": the peaceful coexistence of Muslim political authorities and a secular state in one political system.

5. Recommendations

The special place of religion in Central Asian peoples' cultures and the deep historical roots of religious authorities as well as their strong influence on people's life show that the region's governments must seriously consider this cultural and social component. They must accept the power of religious authorities and – rather than destroying their relationship with them – support them to enter the political processes as a natural element of society. The experience of Tajikistan is the best example showing that only by dealing with the position of religious authorities and with recognizing religious values, ideas and ideals as principal components in people's life, the governments of Central Asia can create real peace in their countries. The experience of the neighbouring Uzbekistan in contrast shows that the continuing confrontation with this powerful element of society causes disorder and chaos.

Furthermore, in the context of a fragile state when the government does not have sufficient capacities for the solution of social and cultural problems, building on the *mahalla* system may become an important factor in dealing with these problems. In this regard, the authorities of Tajikistan should promote the unique opportunities of *mahallas* including their ability to mobilize people for the rehabilitation of rural and urban residential areas (such as canalization maintenance, construction of schools, streets, etc.), their voluntary mechanisms of social charity (such as assistance to old and needy people and orphans, assistance to the poor in organizing weddings, funerals, etc), their educational role and their experience in providing public order (very often *mahalla* successfully resolves family conflicts, tries to prevent prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, etc). Thus, provided a close partnership with and backing by the central government, the *mahallas* can play a constructive role in the transition of the state.

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